

JARGON, PROTOCOLS AND UNIFORMS AS BARRIERS TO EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

Stefano Baldi and Eduardo Gelbstein

Clearly, the world has become “smaller” due to the use of information and communications technologies. In December 2003, during the World Summit on the Information Society, it was reported that over 750 million people used e-mail on a regular basis. As a consequence, the processes of international relations now involve many parties along with diplomats: regional and international organisations, multinational businesses, stock markets, non-governmental organisations, politicians, the press and other media, other civil society players as well as “uncivil society” in various forms.

Difficulties in communication increase with increased contact between people from different countries and different fields of work. We have accepted a few languages as *lingua franca* of our times, and we rely on translators and interpreters, but even so, effective communication remains a challenge. This challenge was recognised long ago. For example, the Book of Genesis, in the *Bible*, tells the story of the construction of the Tower of Babel:

If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other.

Study of human history confirms that this “confusion of our language” in the pre-history of humankind was totally successful; so much so, that communications difficulties occur even in societies sharing a mother tongue.

This paper presents a number of case studies illustrating the role of jargon, protocols and uniforms in creating communication problems. The authors will also provide some pointers for improving communication. The authors are conscious of the fact that in the five thousand years of recorded history, extensive research in philosophy, biology, sociology, psychology and other disciplines has offered few answers to the problems of effective communication across cultures and professions. However, some measures do work, when there is a will from all parties for them to work.

Case Study 1: Responding to International Crisis Situations

While international crisis situations have always existed, the availability of “real time news” through e-mail, fax machines, satellite television, websites and other mechanisms means that a much larger percentage of the world population is now aware of these crises and can follow their development as they unfold. In recent years, the international community has also become better at responding in an increasingly coordinated manner.

International crises exist in two substantially different forms:

- those arising from natural disasters (earthquakes, flooding) or man-made disasters (forest fires, industrial accidents) which create the need for urgent humanitarian assistance;
- those arising from political, religious or economic conflicts and the use of force within a particular state or across borders.

This case study is based on a composite of recent events falling into the second category and involving several stages of intervention, some of which occur concurrently, each with its own communication challenges:

1. Peacekeeping: intervention by military forces from one or more countries often under the coordination of an international organisation;
2. Humanitarian assistance: provided by international organisations, non-governmental organisations and volunteers;
3. Interim government and governance;
4. Withdrawal.

We do not intend to discuss the political and diplomatic aspects of the background against which military and humanitarian aid are deployed, but instead will focus on the problems that arise in these situations involving information, communication and coordination.

Information

During crisis situations information is a scarce resource. The information available may be of doubtful quality because it may stem from unreliable or unverifiable sources. Parties with malicious intent may even feed false information into the process simply to cause confusion and undermine the credibility of the parties responding to an emergency.

The collection of information from multiple sources, some of them unverifiable, almost always leads to inconsistencies in information and to potential confusion. Using this information to support meaningful decisions and action is a major challenge. Working against tight and unpredictable timetables aggravates the problem. Unfortunately, the need to take action on the basis of such information is often unavoidable. The risk associated with this is a potential loss of credibility.

Communication

Effective communication requires the parties involved to share a clear understanding of the various definitions and parameters about which information (and data) are being exchanged - in other words, are we talking about the same thing?

Here, language and, in particular, jargon, plays a key role. Even assuming that all parties have a reasonable command of a common language – for example, International English¹ – the same words may have significantly different meanings to people from different parts of the world. For this reason, “command and control,” “coordination,” “security” and “integration” are always problematic.

Coordination

Assuming that information is available to the various parties involved and that communication has been established, we come into the world of protocols and uniforms, best described by the answers to three simple questions:

1. Who is in command?
2. Are you entitled?
3. Are we compatible?

The first question addresses the issue of authority: who has the right to release information. In crisis situations, most of the information in question is privileged (i.e., not in the public domain), involving details of military activities and locations, logistics of transport and deliveries, field and other intelligence. Some of this information is held by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) or other institutions active in the field. One specific example is the Catholic Church in Africa.

Most crisis situations involve a large number of civilians: victims of a disaster, displaced people and refugees. The issue of human rights and refugee protection becomes particularly complex when the military is required

to search among them for known activists, suspects or other individuals, as the majority of the displaced do not normally have documentation and they require secure shelter.

The second question concerns the relationship between the parties that need to work together. The person authorising the release of information must decide if the party requesting the information is actually entitled to receive this information under the “need to know” protocol. Military operators, as well as police and other emergency service personnel, have a strong culture of confidentiality and a substantial part of the information they deal with is described as “classified.” It can, therefore, be shared only under very specific circumstances and with the proper authority to do so. The nature and objectives of NGOs, on the other hand, lead them to share whatever information they have.²

The last question is the only one with a technical component - that of compatibility of data formats and technologies. If the map references used by the information source are different from those used by the recipient, this incompatibility will render the exchange of information largely useless, if not impossible. The same is true when different actors use incompatible radio communications equipment, operating in different frequency bands or using different encoding mechanisms. In these cases, communication between the parties will not be technically possible.

In a world where these situations arise with unfortunate regularity and involve the simultaneous participation of UN peace-keeping forces, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the World Food Programme (WFP), and many other bodies, the problems of interoperability and information interchange have become major issues. In order to counter these problems, the former President of Finland launched the international initiative for Information Technology and Crisis Management (ITCM).³

Case Study 2: Diplomacy and the Media

Traditional diplomacy was conducted by career civil servants. While civil servants continue to work in the field of diplomacy, today many other players are also present in this field. Diplomacy is a discipline characterised by discretion and careful consideration in the use of language, including many formal protocols concerning what is disclosed, when and how.

Diplomacy has, at its heart, the national interest of the parties involved and its success is determined by the long-term credibility and accuracy of its outcome. The documents produced by diplomats are primarily intended for their national ministries of foreign affairs and are seldom intended for mass readership. Press releases are issued to allow the media to report on the progress and outcome of diplomatic negotiations.

The worlds of diplomacy and the media are fundamentally different and their objectives may not always be compatible. The media is primarily interested in breaking news; ideally, each news agency or correspondent would like to have an “exclusive” before anyone else. Depending on national legislation concerning defamation, libel and other responsibilities, the media is primarily concerned with gaining mass circulation with time-critical information and shaping public opinion. In order to do this, the media may simplify or even oversimplify issues and resort to the use of slogans and soundbites for maximum effect.

For example, in 1989, the European Union planned to introduce a European Currency Unit (the ECU) that would gradually displace national currencies (as was done later with the introduction of the Euro). The position papers and press releases from Brussels at the time were written in the careful language of politicians and administrators, and targeted civil servants in the countries involved who had equivalent backgrounds and functions and who were familiar with the issues. Reporting on this matter, the UK's *Sun* newspaper used a more colloquial approach, including a picture of what is possibly the rudest gesture in the UK on its front cover. The *Sun* was obviously targeting readers with different backgrounds, cultures, educational levels and knowledge of the subject matter than the politicians and administrators who drafted the press releases. This front page achieved such notoriety that to this day it remains quoted on various websites.

The information flowing between diplomatic sources and the media is fairly complex, as shown in *Figure 1* below. In reality, it is even more complex than the illustration shows because a third player is involved: the politician. This discussion deliberately excludes the role of politicians as the authors wish to focus on the roles of jargon, protocols and uniforms in effective communication.



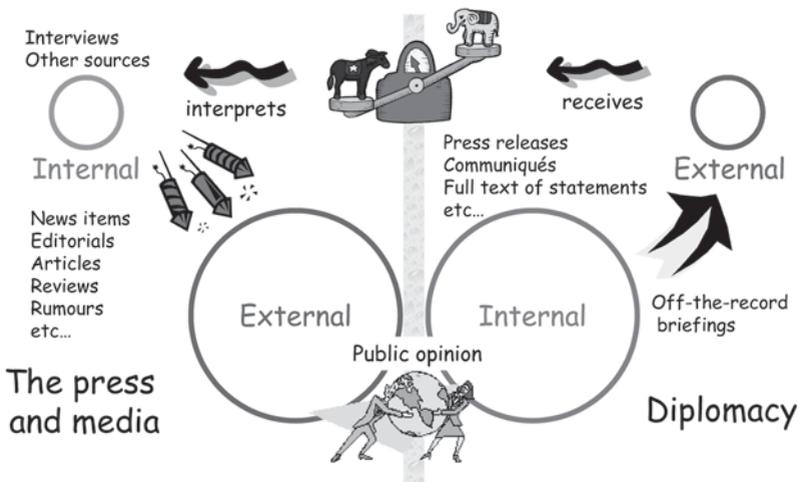


Figure 1: Information Flow between Diplomacy and the Media

Figure 1 shows the relative amount of information that diplomacy and the press produce and how this is influenced by the targeted final recipients of this information. In diplomacy most of the information exchanged and produced is intended for internal use and only a small amount is intended for external recipients. Typically, information intended for external use includes press releases, official statements and off-the-record briefings. For the press the situation is virtually the opposite: most of the information is destined for the (external) public and only a very small amount is kept for internal purposes.

Of course, diplomacy invariably will be found among the external users of the information produced by the press and this creates a kind of circular information flow. The information flow between diplomacy and the press and other media is asymmetric: the amount of information provided by the press (news agencies, newspapers and magazines) and used as a source by diplomats is considerably greater than the amount of public information produced by diplomats intended for use as a source by the press.

It is important to note that today, the press and other media are major players in the world of diplomacy, much of which takes place in the court of public opinion. Politicians are even more sensitive and exposed to public opinion than diplomats and civil servants.

Types of Relationships

Before exploring the factors that make the difference between effective and ineffective communication, it will be useful to examine some aspects of human nature: the human species is a social one, with the unique traits of sophisticated language capabilities and an ability and willingness to trade.

Looking back into our history, and at the work of philosophers and psychologists over the years, it is clear that our relationships are strongly influenced by the closeness that we are able to develop with others. The pyramid in *Figure 2* illustrates a set of levels of personal relationships, from distant to intimate. The top four levels involve our family, friends and colleagues. “Professional fellows” describes people with whom we share a certain level of education, comparable activities, and other characteristics, and with whom, as a result, we can associate without difficulty. For example, diplomats posted in a particular country would consider the diplomats from other countries in the same location as “professional fellows.” The category of “Socio-cultural affinities” moves outside our professional work to describe people with whom we share interests or hobbies, such as liking opera or supporting a particular football club. The pyramid continues to expand, including at each level a larger number of people with whom we have less and less in common beyond our humanity.

Effective communication can be difficult at all levels. Family conflict is all too common, and statistics show that in most murder cases the victim and the murderer know each other.



Figure 2: Human Relationships

We now have the means to communicate directly with a substantial part of the world population (in late 2003, 750 million people used e-mail regularly, while over 1700 million telephone lines exist in the world, according to ITU data).⁴ The widely-accepted view that only six degrees of separation exist between any two individuals in the world may be true.

Although totally different in their nature, both case studies described above illustrate relationship scenarios which can take one of five different forms depending on the players, circumstances and the degree of trust that exists among the parties: collaborative, negotiative, competitive, conflictual and non-recognition. *Figure 3* illustrates how these scenarios are linked to each other and how potentially unstable they are. A relationship can quickly develop from one type to another, resulting either in improved effectiveness of communication (the positive development path) or sliding into a complete breakdown of communication (the negative development path). Regrettably, the negative development path occurs frequently in international relations.

Two of these relationships present a fundamental obstacle to effective communication. *Non-recognition*, which can be as brazen and aggressive as Slobodan Milosevic’s response to the International Criminal Court, blocks any meaningful exchange. It involves a refusal to acknowledge that one or more of the players in the desired exchange has any rights whatsoever. In a *conflictual* situation, parties recognise each other but are unable to work together towards a win-win result and resort instead to verbal abuse and physical violence.

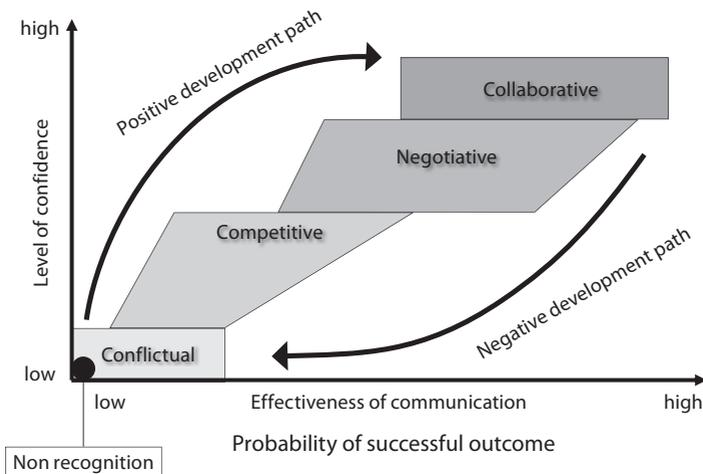


Figure 3: Relationship Scenarios

The other three relationships are often of an unstable nature in the sense that a change in the relationship can be triggered by a relatively minor event - even just one inappropriate word - very quickly.

In the *collaborative* relationship the needs and positions of all the parties are clearly defined and understood and everyone involved shares the will to succeed, as well as information, equipment, accommodation and logistic arrangements.

The *negotiative* relationship has much in common with the collaborative scenario except that some needs and positions may not have been defined clearly enough and require discussion and trading to reach a mutually acceptable outcome.

Collaborative and negotiative relationships can quickly become *competitive* when one of the players needs to (or decides to) play a role different from that which was originally agreed upon. This new role might result in some form of overlap with the responsibilities of others. Another kind of competitive relationship occurs when a “new player” joins an established effort and expects to obtain rights, privileges and concessions from other players. Competitive relationships can quickly deteriorate into non-recognition, conflict and exclusion, if not properly managed.

To make effective communication possible, the concepts of credibility and trust are important. Neither credibility nor trust are automatically and instantly given; they need to be earned. This is why communication with family and friends is much easier than with a stranger. *Figure 4* illustrates how credibility and trust develop over time. At the early stages of a relationship, personal charac-

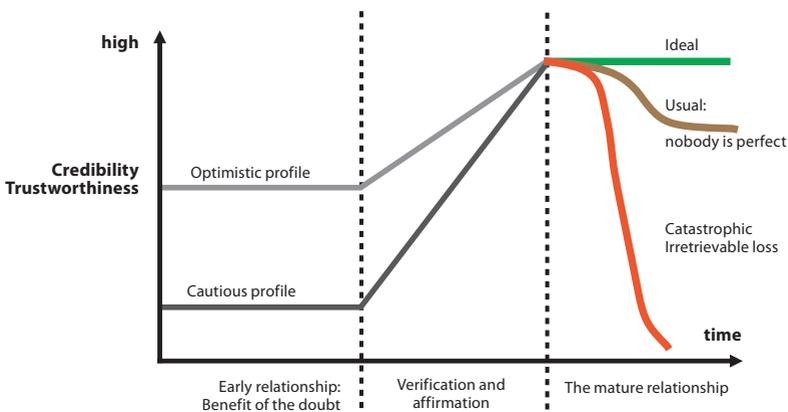


Figure 4: Developing Credibility and Trust

ter largely determines whether we assign the person we are dealing an optimistic profile of credibility and trustworthiness (as we would normally do with a medical doctor) or a cautious profile (as we would do with a door-to-door salesman).

As a relationship develops it can follow many different paths. *Figure 4* depicts a happy situation where credibility and trustworthiness actually increase during the early stages of the relationship (verification and affirmation)⁵ until they reach a high level denoting a mature and stable relationship. Alternately, the mature relationship can involve a catastrophic loss of credibility or trust, which is almost always irretrievable, and implies the end of any meaningful and effective communication.

Nature and Nurture

Nature and nurture play a major role in the way we associate and communicate. Analysis of our DNA reveals that nearly 99% of our DNA is shared with the bonobo (miniature chimpanzee). This 1% difference gives us complex spoken language, a larger cerebral cortex, and the ability to codify and record our knowledge (although the invention of writing occurred only 5,000 years ago).



The remaining 99% represents a major legacy from nature and it has a great impact on the electrochemical activity in our brain. Current scientific understanding of the human brain reveals three major components:

- the *reptile* brain, which drives survival, territory (or dominance) and reproduction;
- the *limbic* brain, which drives association, bonding and the raising of the young; and
- the *cortex*, divided into two halves (left and right) where language, thinking, logic, creativity and all other conscious activities take place.

The reptile and limbic brains are thought to be autonomous and capable of taking over rational thought if they sense that any of the activities they drive need to be invoked. Scientists believe that these characteristics are independent of culture.

The characteristics that are defined by the culture and environment in which we live are described as “nurture.” The elements most often associated with nurture include language, values and traditions, body language and other non-verbal cues. Anyone exposed to intercultural exchanges realises how important the aspects of nurture are and how lack of awareness of each other’s beliefs and values can lead to diplomatic blunders or worse. Violations of another person’s cultural norms can result in the loss of credibility and trustworthiness, as described above.⁶

Jargon, Protocols and Uniforms

Jargon is an abbreviated form of language that encapsulates tacit knowledge. It is very useful in a community sharing a common interest as it removes much information redundancy. At the same time, it represents a barrier to those unfamiliar with it and makes it possible to quickly identify the “outsiders.” Outsiders will feel excluded until they learn how to effectively use the jargon of the group concerned.

BTW PLZ 4GVM E 4 BEING A PITA IYKWIM. CUL8.

A typical Short Message Service (SMS) text, used in mobile phones. A close translation is: By the way, please forgive me for being a pain in the ***; if you know what I mean. See you later.

Patient complains of pruritus in LLL.

Note made by a doctor about a patient with an itchy leg.

Doubleclick the icon on the system tray and change the defaults.

Instructions from a Help screen in the Windows operating system.

The perp’s MO has been noted by the SOCO.

UK police jargon. Translated, it says that the suspected criminal’s modus operandi is familiar to the Scene of Crime Officer.

17 diplomats from country XYZ, having engaged in activities incompatible with their status, have been asked to leave the country within 48 hours.

A report in diplomatic-speak, which a newspaper would publish as “17 XYZ Spies Expelled.”

Friendly Fire.

Military-speak to describe a situation where military personnel were attacked by their own colleagues or allies.

Following are a few examples of jargon, some familiar and some likely to be totally unfamiliar.

Jargon goes beyond styles of writing to encompass different pronunciations of the same word. For example, in referring to the standard language for making queries on a database - Structured Query Language or SQL - non-programmers are most likely to say *Ess Kyu Ell*, whereas database professionals refer to it as *Sequel*.

After a time, jargon that has proven useful may become incorporated into mainstream language. For example, *Internet* and *e-mail* both originated as jargon. In other cases, jargon which originated with one group of people has become part of the common language of inter-professional communication. In the case of the relationship between diplomacy and the press, several terms and acronyms which are not yet found in the dictionary are now extensively used by both parties with the same meaning, although sometimes in a different context: *G8*, *G77*, *equitable geographical distribution*, *Intifada*, *golpe*, *embargo* and others. Interestingly, in many instances it is not possible to ascertain whether the expression or acronym originated from diplomatic or editorial usage.

A *protocol* is a code prescribing the correct etiquette and precedence in specific circumstances. Protocols are well established in diplomacy, the military, social life, formal meetings and many other situations. As with jargon, lack of awareness can lead to, at the very least, embarrassment.

Protocols usually consist of a simple set of rules. Protocols also exist in nature: in the animal world, for example, protocols are referred to as "instincts." A school of fish or a flock of birds flying in large numbers in astonishing formations use the very simple protocol "stay close to one like you but don't touch him."

Following are some examples of protocols more closely related to the subject of this paper.

Do not interrupt: a protocol usually observed in conferences and presentations, where the audience will wait until the question and answer session to interact with the speaker.

The chain of command: key protocol of the military and law enforcement – orders given by a higher ranking officer must be complied with. Negotiation or argument is not permitted.

The press conference: an important protocol for politicians and diplomats dealing with the press and the media. This is a formal event where a prepared text will be delivered, question and answer sessions will be managed and all the statements will have a clear attribution.

Off-the record briefing: an even more important protocol for placing information with the press and the media without attribution. Typically the media would refer to “a highly placed source.”

Geneva Convention: a set of detailed arrangements for *inter alia* the Treatment of Prisoners of War (adopted on August 12, 1949, by the Diplomatic Conference for the Establishment of International Conventions for the Protection of Victims of War).

The consequences of ignoring a protocol can be significant. Ignoring the chain of command can result in a dishonourable discharge or even a court martial. Non-compliance with the Geneva Convention is considered a major breach of human rights and of grave concern to the international community. Similarly, a journalist who chooses not to respect the off-the-record nature of a statement and reveals its origin is highly likely to be excluded and ignored by the source he has disclosed.

Uniforms consist of a form of dress of a distinctive design worn by members of a particular group as a means of identification. This identification can serve two purposes: an indication of profession (judge, nurse, garage mechanic) and/or an indication of status (priest, bishop, soldier, brigadier-general).

A uniform confers authority on the person wearing it in the environment in which he or she operates. Some uniforms exist where the concepts of “uniform” and “authority” are not the usual ones: the four members of a string quartet wear formal evening dress; tuxedos for the men, a little black number for the woman. As virtually all concert performances in classical music require this kind of clothing, it may be regarded as a uniform. When, prior to the beginning of the concert, one of the musicians addresses the audience to request that all cellphones be switched off, this is in fact an order given in the most polite terms using the authority implicit in the “uniform.”

Even a person wearing the same type of clothes as everyone around him may be in fact wearing a uniform. If you see a couple of people approaching you with a microphone and a TV camera, these accessories perform the role of identifying them as reporters, and therefore constitute a “uniform.”



The indication of status implicit in a uniform may require a measure of insider knowledge to decode. For example, the United States of America Armed Forces have 43 different insignia to denote rank (11 each for the Navy, Army and Air Force and 10 for the Marines). Similar complexities exist in other armed forces, police forces, churches of various denominations and elsewhere.

Effective Communication in the Real World

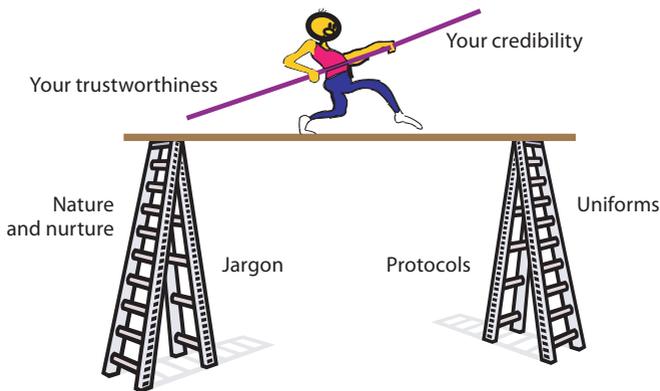


Figure 5: Effective Communication

Figure 5 summarises the points made in this paper: effective communication is no more and no less than a complex balancing act, regrettably, with no safety net.

In 1580, Michel de Montaigne accurately stated that “*the most universal quality is diversity.*” Many factors combine to make effective communication in an international and intercultural environment a major challenge. One such factor is *cognitive styles* (how individuals organise and process information). Cognitive styles are strongly influenced by cultural orientation and, in general, it can be said that people are either *open-minded* or *closed-minded*. Open-minded people see issues in relation to their context and admit that they do not know (or that there may not be) answers to the many questions that arise and need to be explored before coming to a conclusion. Closed-minded people operate on the basis of dogmatic answers to issues, which are rigid and non-negotiable. It is interesting to note that most closed-minded people would describe themselves as being open-minded.

Another factor is *value system*. Definitions of what is “right” and what is “wrong,” what is the “truth” and what is accepted as evidence, differ around the world. Lack of awareness of these differences will invariably make communication among different groups difficult, if not impossible.

Without an appropriate level of *trustworthiness and credibility*, communication will be severely limited. While credibility may be established by a person’s track record and reputation, trustworthiness needs to be earned by actions and subsequently maintained.

Our inheritance from *nature and nurture, jargon, protocols and uniforms* are all factors that raise the level at which we perform this balancing act, and it is only through our own understanding of what we know and don’t know, and the willingness to learn, that we can hope to succeed.

Leaders have the responsibility of facilitating the removal of barriers to enhance the effectiveness of communication, information sharing and coordination of activities. The concept of the Chain of Command, which is not exclusive to armed forces and law enforcement, implies that only the leadership can initiate such a top-down process.

Finally, in situations where it is necessary to choose between inconsistent or incompatible solutions, implementers must be willing to abandon the “Mindless Pursuit of Perfection” syndrome that wastes so much time and energy for, often, little return. The concept of “Good Enough” has much to commend it and yet is frequently ignored in the search of something better.

The Importance of Improving Inter-Professional Communication

Effective communication is doomed if the parties involved have no will to achieve it. In our complex, networked and interactive world, the consequences of failed communication can be disastrous in times of crisis. In many crisis situations, communication has been ineffective for reasons that could be attributed to jargon, protocols and uniforms.

A very serious example took place in New York, on September 11, 2001. A New York Police Department helicopter flying over the twin towers determined that their collapse was imminent. The radio message from the helicopter to evacuate the building was received by police officers, who start-



ed to carry out the evacuation. However, the officers of the New York Fire Department relied on a different radio system, incompatible with that of the police, and failed to receive the message. During these critical minutes, police officers tried to evacuate the building while fire fighters were trying to work their way in. Because of their different uniforms and different chains of command, fire fighters could not and would not accept instructions from police officers.

We all know the tragic consequences of this inability to communicate and all of us concerned with inter-professional communication, particularly in crisis situations, should never forget the enormous responsibility that we have for the life and security of others.

Endnotes

- 1 *International English* differs significantly from the English spoken in the UK, USA, Canada, Australia and other Anglophone countries: it has few grammar and syntax rules and any mistakes in either are ignored by all parties during exchanges. The vocabulary often includes many non-dictionary words made up to meet specific circumstances.
- 2 For a real example of how information sharing is conducted, see the website of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) at <http://www.reliefweb.int>. Some of the information on crisis areas in this website is provided by NGOs active in the field.
- 3 For more information on this initiative please see the website at <http://www.ahtisaari.fi>.
- 4 See <http://millenniumindicators.un.org>.
- 5 An alternative expression for “verification and affirmation” popular in some circles is “walk the talk.”
- 6 The good news is that a vast and very helpful range of material is available on this subject, ranging from the humorous and accurate booklets in the series *The Xenophobe’s Guide to(nationality)*, the book *Kiss, Bow or Shake Hands*, and many more on, for example, body language and gestures, such as *Supplemento al Dizionario Italiano*.